

U.S. Community Colleges — A Gateway to U.S. Higher Education for International Students

One of the ways in which U.S. higher education is unique is in its diversity. Unlike many other countries, several types of institutions make up the U.S. system. These include: research universities, comprehensive universities, four-year colleges, and both public and private institutions. In addition, the two-year or community college, perhaps more than any other type of institution, has helped U.S. citizens by the millions to continue their education after secondary school. Community colleges provide the first two years of a university education in the United States, enabling students to transfer to a four-year college or university to earn a bachelor's degree. These two-year institutions constitute the largest and fastest-growing sector of higher education in America; there are now close to 1,200 regionally accredited community colleges located throughout the nation. Community colleges account for nearly half of the entire U.S. higher education system, serving more than 11 million students. In 2004, roughly 46% of all U.S. undergraduates attended a community college.

The overall attractiveness of U.S. community colleges has increased over the years, both abroad and in the United States. Each year, thousands of international students recognize that U.S. community colleges are an excellent way to begin their postsecondary education, and enroll in these institutions. Most of these students plan to transfer the course credits they earn to a four-year college or university toward a bachelor's degree.

U.S. community colleges offer international students numerous benefits and opportunities:

- **Lower Cost.** Tuition is significantly lower than four-year colleges and universities because community colleges are funded by state or local taxes. Tuition costs average about \$6,000 per year as compared to \$15,000 for a four-year institution.
- **Easy Transfer to a University.** A “2+2” system in the United States refers to an efficient system of “articulation” between a two-year college and a four-year college

or university. “Articulation” is the process by which one institution matches its courses or requirements to course work completed at another institution. Students rely on course articulation to assure that the courses they complete will not have to be repeated at the institution to which they are transferring. Most community colleges have articulation agreements with four-year colleges and universities, ensuring that credits earned at the two-year institution will count toward the four-year degree program.

- **Accredited Institutions.** U.S. community colleges, four-year colleges and major universities are all accredited by the same regional accrediting agencies throughout the United States. Community college programs must meet the same criteria as four-year colleges and universities to attain accreditation status. This is the reason why universities will accept course credits obtained at community colleges.
- **Wide Variety of Programs.** Community colleges have hundreds of majors from which to choose. Many international students pursue programs in the fields of business management, computer science, engineering, and health sciences-related programs, but they study everything from art to zoology.
- **State-of-the-Art Technology.** Community colleges incorporate technology for use in assessment and instruction. Computer labs offer advanced equipment and programs. Community colleges also offer advanced, state-of-the-art courses in biotechnology, nano-technology, oceanography, and numerous other fields of study.
- **English as a Second Language.** Most community colleges offer a wide range of English course offerings and an array of support services to ensure that international students with different language levels succeed in their U.S. study programs.
- **A Supportive Learning Environment.** Community colleges typically offer small class sizes averaging fewer than 30 students, allowing personal attention and ongoing support from professors. The focus is on individual student success within a learning environment designed to respond to student learning patterns and needs. Community college professors, rather than teaching assistants, conduct classes; their primary responsibility is teaching, rather than conducting research. Many are involved with support services for students, such as tutoring, advising, and writing labs, as well as

serving as advisers to international student clubs and international student service centers.

- **Diversity.** U.S. community college students come from diverse cultural heritages and ethnicities. A wide spectrum of clubs and activities are offered that celebrate and support the ethnic melting pot that comprises society in the United States.
- **Hands-on Access to U.S. Culture.** Because they are locally-oriented and funded, community colleges tend to have stronger ties with their local communities than most other educational institutions, both on- and off- campus. This relationship provides international students with extensive opportunities to interact with Americans and to experience real U.S. customs and way of life.
- **Variety of Locations and Campus Sizes.** Community colleges, like other educational institutions in the United States, differ widely. Some are large, multi-campus institutions located in big cities, while others are much smaller schools located in rural settings and serving small student populations.
- **Distinguished Alumni.** International students thinking of studying at a two-year college in the U.S. might wish to know of distinguished leaders and notable persons who began their postsecondary education at a U.S. community college. Alumni of U.S. community colleges include: **Arnold Schwarzenegger**, governor of California; **Eileen Collins**, NASA space shuttle commander; **George Lucas**, producer/director of the “Star Wars” movie series; **Tom Hanks** and **Clint Eastwood**, film actors; **Walt Disney**, founder of Disney studios and Disney World; **Calvin Klein**, designer; genome scientist **Craig Ventnor**; **Richard Carmona**, M.D., U.S. Surgeon General. Other alumni include U.S. Congressional representatives and other high-level U.S. government officials, as well as chief executive officers of Fortune 500 corporations.

For international students, community colleges can be “the gateway to higher education in the United States” -- an opportunity to begin their U.S. higher education experience at a high quality, accredited institution with an affordable tuition, an efficient system of articulation,, a supportive learning environment with opportunities to build and enhance English skills, and the chance to connect with a U.S. community and culture.

In a world where knowledge is the new “currency” for success, community colleges are a key component of a U.S. higher education that can provide academically qualified and motivated international students a high quality, but lower-cost road to a U.S. four-year degree.

*For more information about studying at a U.S. community college, go to www.CC-USA.org or read **A Guide to Studying at U.S. Community Colleges**, available at your local EducationUSA advising center.*